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BACK TO PENTECOST

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Anything that Dr. Gladden writes compels thoughtful attention. In these days when there is so much undue emphasis upon the accidental elements of Christianity, his presentation of fundamental Christian truths ought to be of great weight.

Some young minister wrote me not long ago raising the question about this phrase, "Back to Pentecost," which those about him were using as a slogan. How much virtue or significance is there in this cry?—this was his question. How desirable is it that we who live in the twentieth century after Christ should go back to Pentecost for our ideals and our ruling motives? To what extent ought we of this generation to direct our aims by the conduct and teachings of the Christians of the earliest apostolic times, as we find them set before us in the first chapters of the Acts of the Apostles?

The question is pertinent. There is no doubt that we can find instruction and inspiration in that history. Yet the expectation that the examples or the ideals of that early day will furnish a pattern by which our thinking and living must be shaped is most misleading.

The call to go back is one that we are always hearing. "Back to Christ!" has been a common motto in late years, and it is not without pertinence. Yet it is well to remember that that is not, as a rule, the way to find him. "Behold he goeth before you," the angel said to the disciples before Pentecost; and this has always been true. There has never been a day when he has not

been far in advance of his most progressive followers. "Forgetting the things that are behind," cries Paul, "I stretch forward to the things that are before!"

Yet, if there ever was a time when this cry of "Back to Christ" was the counsel of wisdom, it was this Pentecostal time. It is doubtful whether there has ever been a day since Jesus went away from the earth when his followers departed from him so fatally and so far as during these Pentecostal days. That, I am aware, will be an astonishing and an incredible statement; but it is made deliberately and after careful study, and I ask serious attention to it. I have been giving considerable study, of late, to these beginnings of the Apostolic Age, and I am convinced that the mind of the church has been confused and its ideals clouded through all the ages by the record of what was said and done in these Pentecostal days.

That the record is very imperfect there can be no doubt. It must have been made up a great many years after the events which it narrates. That the author of the Third Gospel is the author of the Book of Acts is hardly questionable; the Gospel was probably written as late as 80 A.D. and the history sometime afterward. It must therefore have been composed fifty years or more after

the things which it describes had taken place; and probably very few of the actors in those scenes were alive. At any rate, we know that there is much confusion in the narrative.

What became of the disciples after the death of Jesus we do not know. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus promised to reappear to them in Galilee, and that they went thither in obedience to his summons, and that there he revealed himself to them. Luke, on the other hand, neither in the Gospel nor in the Acts, gives any intimation of this visit to Galilee; it is clearly implied, if it is not explicitly stated, that all the events connected with the reappearances of Jesus took place in or about Jerusalem. "His silence [concerning this Galilean visit], both in the Gospel and in the Acts, can be explained," says Dr. McGiffert, "only on the supposition that he knew nothing of a post-resurrection visit to Galilee. Indeed, the account given in the Gospel is so constructed as to seem to exclude such a visit."¹ When there is such uncertainty as to highly important matters of fact it is clear that we are dealing with documents that need scrutiny.

Especially needful is it that we should be on our guard with respect to statements which are supposed to interpret or reflect the spirit of the teachings of Jesus. It is doubtful whether these disciples, scattered by the tragedy of Calvary, and brought hurriedly together in Jerusalem after his departure, were in a mental condition which qualified them to represent the mind that was in Jesus. They had shown themselves, as the gospel records make plain,

quite capable of misunderstanding him while he was with them; it is only by the assumption that a miracle had been wrought upon their minds, making them incapable of error, that we can regard this record as inerrant. But the record itself invalidates this assumption. If we had, therefore, the exact report of their sayings and doings in these first days, we should be entitled to look for a great many evidences of prejudice and narrowness of mind. We should have reason for doubting whether these disciples were capable of revealing, in their corporate life, the spirit and purpose of the life of their Master. And when we know that this record represents an accumulated tradition of fifty years in which the pure teachings of Jesus may well have been somewhat adulterated, we can see why the Pentecostal gospel may have diverged considerably from the message first spoken by the Master.

Certain it is that it did diverge in startling ways. The gospel preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, or by Stephen in his speech before the Sanhedrin, is not the gospel preached by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in the great parables of Luke's Gospel. The atmosphere is different, the accent is altered, the ruling ideas are utterly changed. It is strange that sixty generations of disciples should have kept on piecing the Acts and the Gospels together and never have been aware of the difference in the texture. It is the fiction of infallibility that closes our eyes to the presence of facts.

Consider Peter's great sermon on the Day of Pentecost. "It is," says Dr. McGiffert, "the earliest extant Christian

¹ *The Apostolic Age*, p. 38.

apology. It is, moreover, a thoroughly representative discourse. It reproduces, not the thought of Peter alone, but the thought of his fellow-Christians as well. The spirit of primitive Jewish Christianity in general speaks in it." Precisely that. And the spirit of primitive Jewish Christianity was about as far from the spirit of Christ as the east is from the west. The spirit of primitive Jewish Christianity had to be exorcised before the truth as it is in Jesus ever found a footing on the earth.

Primitive Jewish Christianity was simply the belief that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah—the King who was to come and restore the Kingdom to Israel. And this was the message which the apostles began to proclaim at Pentecost. Their minds were saturated with the Jewish ideas about the Messiah, and their aim was to prove that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies. In some respects he did not seem to fulfil them; his death appeared to contradict all their ideas, but the disciples sought to show that, rightly interpreted, the prophecies were fulfilled in him.

Instead, therefore, of preaching Jesus, of enforcing his message, of emphasizing the truth he taught, of driving home the great revelation given by him to the world concerning the character of God and his relations to men, they harked back to Jewish messianism and tried to show that Jesus was the fulfilment of its ideas. As they conceived the situation—so says Dr. McGiffert—"apologetics was the imperative need of the hour; not simply the proclamation of the gospel, but the defense of it and the defense of Jesus himself, the preacher of it. Thus the emphasis was changed

from the gospel itself to the evidence of its truth; from the message to the messenger. Not the fatherhood of God, but the messiahship of Jesus, formed the burden of the preaching of the apostles, and so the Master's estimate of values was reversed."

Read all the speeches of Peter—the speech on the Day of Pentecost, the speech in Solomon's Porch, the speech before the Sanhedrin, and note their contents. Compare with them the extended address of Stephen before his martyrdom. Do any of them recall to you the words or the spirit of Jesus? Is there any reference in them to the doctrines which he made central in all his teaching? Is the great fact of the universal fatherhood mentioned in any of them? Is there anything about the meaning of prayer, the spirituality of worship, the inwardness of morality, the nature of forgiveness, the blessedness of service, the sacrificial ministry to the neediest and the lost? Of these central, cardinal, vital elements in the message of Christ, the message to which his life gave all its meaning, you will find no suggestion in these Pentecostal narratives.

They are all devoted to proving that Jesus is the Messiah; that these marvellous signs which have appeared in connection with his coming are proof of a condign judgment which is to be visited on those who have put him to death; that his resurrection is proof of his power to judge and punish his enemies; that those who now accept him as the Messiah and are baptized in his name will be spared and forgiven, and that all who refuse or neglect to do so will be utterly destroyed from among

the people. Moreover, this judgment is impending—Jesus has ascended to heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God, but he is coming again immediately to make his enemies his footstool; and all who are wise will make haste to save themselves “from this untoward generation.” It is evident that these disciples declared this message with tremendous conviction, that the rulers were convinced of their guilt in putting to death an innocent man, that the people were filled with compunction for their share in the crime, and that great numbers of them confessed and were baptized, accepting as their prophet the Messiah whom they had crucified.

But if their only knowledge of the life and character of Christ was that which they gained by the methods described in the record of these Pentecostal days, it is to be feared that their discipleship was not in all cases so intelligent as might have been desired. They may have been convinced that they were attaching themselves to the true Messiah; but of the spiritual revelations and the ethical realities of the Kingdom which Jesus came to establish they must have known very little. Their subsequent history makes it entirely clear that their “conversion,” like that of many great accessions of later generations, must have been a very superficial experience.

The search for fruits of the Spirit in this new community brings to light some interesting facts. The manifestations of the Spirit, on which most emphasis was placed, are, indeed, somewhat equivocal. The astonishing portent of the tongues, on which Peter so confidently relied, has never been clearly

explained. That special linguistic gifts were miraculously conferred at that time has been the common understanding, but there is no intimation in the subsequent history of any continuance of these gifts; the apostles were compelled to rely on interpreters, and there is no hint of any miraculous power to communicate with men of other languages. Paul’s discussion of the gift of tongues, in his letters to the Corinthians, makes it plain that in his day the gift had no such significance; for he declares that the man who spoke with tongues never knew what he was saying, and that those who listened knew no more. Evidently, in his experience, the gift of tongues was a mere emotional outpouring of meaningless vocables, similar, probably, to the utterances of the Holy Rollers of our own day. Paul discouraged the cultivation of it; he said that he would rather speak five intelligible and sensible words than ten thousand words in a tongue. Just what the gift of tongues on the day of Pentecost may have been we have no means of knowing, but Paul’s attitude toward the matter does not encourage the belief that it was evidence of any profound moral change in the characters of those who experienced it.

Other and far clearer tokens of spiritual influences operating in the new community are found in the record. The unity of the new community—as it appeared among the original one hundred and twenty, and later in the enlarged society—was a hopeful sign.

The courage and confidence of their leaders is also inspiring. The manner in which these young fishermen confronted the magnates of their nation

and told them the truth about their own misdoings is certainly refreshing. The grand *non possumus* of Peter and John has resounded down the generations and will never be silenced: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you rather than unto God, judge ye, for we cannot but speak the things which we saw and heard."

The incipient and partial communism which sprang up in the multitude of believers may also be appealed to as proof that the spirit of the Master was finding expression in their lives. Considerable numbers of the Jewish proselytes from other lands who had come to Jerusalem for the national feasts, and had been convinced by Peter's speech, were probably remaining in Jerusalem, waiting for the return of the Master, which Peter had so confidently promised. For their daily needs some provision was required, and the response to that call seems to have been generous. It is not probable that any enforced community of goods was attempted, but spontaneous contributions of a very liberal sort were made. It is not singular that men like Barnabas were ready to dispose of their property for the replenishment of this relief fund; the speedy return of the Messiah, with power to set up his Kingdom and to reorganize society, made all possessions precarious. But this impulse to share the good of this life was, no doubt, the prompting of that deeper democracy which some of them had learned from Jesus.

It does not appear that this impulse reached beyond the boundaries of their own communion; and there are signs of a halting recognition of it even within that pale. A complaint arose

against the Hebrews among the Grecian Jews, or Hellenists, that the widows of the latter were neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Hellenists were those who had been converted to Judaism; they were not native Hebrews, and the prejudice of race proved to be stronger than the bonds of religion. The new allegiance to Jesus as the Messiah had not extinguished that antipathy; it was existing here in the heart of primitive Jewish Christianity at the very outset, and it was bound to make its divisive and paralyzing influences felt in the coming years. The apostles seem to have dealt with the matter judiciously at the beginning, but this was not to be the end of it.

How much was lacking of the spirit and temper of Christ in the hearts of these teachers is shown in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Their attempt to deceive the community and to gain credit which was not rightly theirs was discreditable and even deplorable; that they merited indignant rebuke is clear, but the manner of dealing with them reveals little of the spirit of Christ. It is not stated that the infliction of death upon them was by the direct volition of Peter, but that is the implication, and his address to Sapphira gives that impression. It is not probable that Jesus ever intended, in giving to Peter the leadership of the apostolic band, to confer on him the power of striking people dead for telling lies; it is not congruous with the life or the teachings of Jesus, and yet it appears probable that Peter thought himself intrusted with this power and that his associates and followers believed him to possess it. For after these tragical deaths it is reported

that "great fear came upon the whole church and upon all that heard these things. And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people." Certainly we cannot imagine such a story being told about Jesus, and the appearance of it in this record is an indication of the imperfect Christianity of these Pentecostal days.

When there arose the larger question of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Christian communion, these Jerusalem Christians at once adopted an obstructive policy. Peter is reported to have had miraculous revelations of the divine purpose to make no distinctions of race in the offers of the gospel, and he seems to have been temporarily convinced by them. When he was afterward arraigned by the Jerusalem church for having gone so far as to eat with Gentiles, he justified himself on the ground of the special revelation which had been given him. But the Jerusalem church seems to have staunchly maintained its exclusive attitude. It was willing to receive Gentiles into the Christian communion, but only on condition that they first be circumcised and become Jews. It was to Paul that the breaking of these obstructive barriers to the program of Christianity was mainly due. The church at Antioch, gathered largely under his labors, became the headquarters of the liberated church, by which the gospel, freed from the fetters of the old Judaism, was spread through Western Asia and Europe. Between these two centers of influence, Jerusalem and Antioch, the controversy was sometimes sharp. Peter, as the leader of the mother-church in Jerusalem, had a

part in it which was not always creditable to him—sometimes fraternizing with the liberal party and eating with uncircumcised Christians, then again, prodded by the rigid Judaizers from the mother-church, withdrawing from fellowship with the Gentiles. An attempt was made to reconcile these conflicting tendencies, and an agreement was reached by which it was supposed that the difficulty was settled, but it is doubtful whether either party adhered to it; Paul went on preaching to Jews and Gentiles and gathering them into one fellowship, but for many years he was hindered and harassed by the "primitive Jewish Christianity," which had its center and seat at Jerusalem and which perpetuated the traditions of the Day of Pentecost. Emissaries of this church followed him from city to city and sought to create dissensions in the churches which he had organized; considerable portions of his earlier epistles are devoted to controversies with them. The bitterest words he ever wrote were directed at their machinations. "I fear," he says, speaking of their influence, "lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve in his craftiness, your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity that is toward Christ." More explicitly: "Such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ." They are Satan's ministers, "whose end shall be according to their works."

As the years went on this controversy became less bitter; in the later epistles of Paul it seems to be quiescent. The fact appears to be that the liberated gospel was advancing so rapidly that

these attempts to obstruct it became hopeless.

Professor Ropes says:

Jewish Christianity failed to dominate the growing church throughout the world, and coincidentally with this failure, its importance in Christian history gradually diminished. . . . When Jewish Christianity once suffered the loss of its leadership and control its case was hopeless. In the year 70 Jerusalem was taken by Titus, the Temple burned, and the city, excepting a few towers and parts of the walls, razed to the ground. . . . Jerusalem soon became a horrible scene of bloody partisan strife and mob violence, and at last the Christians—how many in number we do not know—withdrew from the Holy City, and fled across the Jordan, and took up their residence in the Gentile town of Pella. Without a center, without any important general organization, without any great leader, Jewish Christianity as a destructive power in the Christian church came to an end.¹

Such, then, is the history of the Pentecostal church. It does not appear to warrant the exceptional distinction which has always been imputed to it. It had a great opportunity, it was called to a great service, it occupied a conspicuous position, but it did not take the leadership in the development of Christianity which seemed rightfully to belong to it. Its influence served to hinder and to obstruct rather than to promote the spread of the gospel of Christ.

The capital fact is, however, that before it was fifty years old this church became extinct. This was not merely because the community which sheltered it was overthrown—Judaism survived the ruin of its capital city, but Jewish

Christianity ceased to be. The ideas for which it stood, the truths which it sought to make effective, had failed to maintain their hold upon the human mind. The Christianity of Christ went on, conquering and to conquer, but Jewish Christianity disappeared from history.

There must have been a reason for this, and the reason must have to do with the vital elements of Christianity. There must have been a failure to grasp and to emphasize these vital elements. I think that the truth is well stated in those sentences of Professor McGiffert which I have quoted. It was the belief of the apostles that "apologetics was the imperative need of the hour; not the proclamation of the gospel but the defence of it, and the defence of Jesus himself, the preacher of it." That was the fatal error. Apologetics is never the imperative need of any hour. The proclamation of the gospel is always the imperative need; not the defense of it, much less the defense of the preacher of it. What the world needed then, what Jerusalem needed then, was not the demonstration that Jesus was the Messiah; it was just the reaffirmation of the truth which Jesus had been teaching—the testimony to the verity of his great gospel message.

"Not the fatherhood of God, but the messiahship of Jesus," says this historian, "formed the burden of the preaching of the apostles, and so the Master's estimate of values was reversed." I doubt whether any disciple or apostle, any priest or prelate, has ever been wise enough to reverse the Master's estimate of values. It is doubtful whether Peter

¹ *The Apostolic Age.*

and John knew enough to do it, and there is reason to believe that when they did it they led the church and Christendom into a fatal error. If Peter had gone right on preaching the fatherhood of God, just as Jesus preached it, with conviction and fervor, he would have saturated his own mind with ideas and principles which would have kept him from some fatal errors—from making such a spectacle of himself, for example, as he made at Antioch; and he would have gathered about him a company of believers whose bond of union would not be broken by the destruction of Jerusalem.

Certain it is that the truth which the apostles determined to lay aside at Pentecost, and *not* to make the burden of their preaching, is the central truth of religion. The one thing that men always need is to know God—not merely to have the correct theories about him, with which apologetics will supply them, but *to know him*. This is the knowledge into which Jesus sought to bring men, and this first-hand knowledge brings unity into all our thinking and makes apologetics superfluous. The absence of this ungirds character and weakens the social bond. If Peter and John had devoted their time to the demonstration that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies, and had sought instead to follow Jesus and to lead their disciples into that intimate acquaintance with God to which he was always calling them, there might have been less spectacular manifestation on the Day of Pentecost, and the immediate accession to the church might not have been as large, but there would have been among its members a vision of the Kingdom and a passion for service

which would have survived all political disasters. Of such a church the record would never have been written that its energies were largely given during its lifetime to preventing uncircumcised persons from acknowledging Jesus as Master and Lord, nor would its obituary have been written while its first members were still alive.

If this seems a harsh judgment, let it be remembered that the disappearance from history of the first Christian church is to be accounted for. The failure of the first attempt to organize Christianity is not a light matter. We may explain it and excuse it; but to celebrate it as if it were a triumph and to copy its blunders as inspired examples is not the part of wisdom. Yet this, unhappily, is what the Christian church has always been doing. The obsession of scriptural infallibility has prevented Christians from criticizing the doctrines preached by Peter and from testing the ruling principles incorporated in the first Christian community, to see whether they conformed to the teachings and the example of Jesus; and the record in the Acts of the Apostles has been taken as the object-lesson of the Christian churches. There was much to learn from it, but unhappily there was much to unlearn; and error and truth have been lumped together as equally inspired. The fact that the Pentecostal church went to pieces in the first century and left scarcely a remnant of itself amid the social wreckage does not seem to have suggested any question as to the validity of its origin.

And unhappily the method of the Pentecostal founders appears to have been widely adopted by Christian propa-

gandists in all the generations. The assumption that "apologetics is the imperative need of the hour," and that the first thing to be attended to is "not simply the proclamation of the gospel, but the defense of it, and the defense of Jesus himself the preacher of it," has been quite too common in every age of the church. The example of Pentecost has encouraged many preachers to reverse the Master's estimate of values and make something quite other than "the fatherhood of God" the burden of their preaching. That, indeed, has been the one truth most conspicuously neglected. It would, perhaps, be truer to say that by large sections of Christendom it is the one truth most passionately denied. Rev. William A. Sunday is quite true to the tradition which he rather ignorantly follows when he says, as he has said a hundred times, that "the doctrine of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is the worst rot that ever was dug out of hell, and every minister who preaches it is a liar." Such a denial is not common nowadays in evangelical pulpits, but the truth about God has been so obscured and perverted in our theological speculations that the central doctrine of his fatherhood has been practically repudiated by most of them. The mere mention of the word in many influential quarters exposes the speaker to the suspicion of heresy. It is hardly too much to say that a large part of the business of the church at present seems to be not so much to give effect to the message of Christ as to furnish credentials to the messenger.

All this is the natural result of the adoption of the method introduced by the Pentecostal propagandists, of making apologetics the imperative need of the hour, of substituting for the proclamation of the gospel the defense of it, of changing the emphasis from the gospel itself to the evidence for its truth.

This is much as if a physician sent to a plague-ridden country with a specific for the disease should neglect to administer the remedy and devote his time to certifying the skill of the scientist who discovered it.

The one thing that the world needs most today, let us repeat, is the truth that Jesus came to bring—the truth about God. It is the failure of the church to grasp and enforce this central truth that explains the fatal weakness of the church in this critical hour. Dr. Eliot was bearing solemn testimony when he said the other day, at the Andover Commencement, that "he felt that the underlying cause of the war was that no church had succeeded in setting forth to the world an adequate conception of Almighty God. The churches had turned away from the thought of God and had turned to the Virgin or to Jesus or to the saints, and had not sufficiently emphasized the constant relation of the divine energy to all creation. . . . The endeavor of all the churches today must be to convey to the world the right idea of God." This was certainly the central purpose of Jesus Christ. We do not honor him when we reverse his estimate of values by putting any other purpose above it.